

Religious Beliefs and Practices

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Besides the above-mentioned buildings on the sacred grounds of 778 the *Khati*, there are also: (1) an altar put together from stones. 396 On the altar is placed a cup, and around it are placed different 782 objects, such as beads, small looking-glasses, pieces of metal, money, etc., which are brought by the people as offerings to the *Khati*. (2) Near the altar is a pit covered with stone slabs and having a quadrangular aperture through which runs the blood of sacrificed animals, the skulls of which are hung or set up on the branches of the trees nearby. (3) The stone pillar about one and one-half metres high, with a square base and gradually inclined forward to the flat top, so that the pillar represents the form of a truncated pyramid. Upon it is found a great number of horns of different shapes and kinds from wild animals which have been killed and brought as thank-offerings to the *Khati* by hunters. During the special religious celebrations and festivals, the candles are fixed upon it and burned in honor of the *Khati*.

The whole ground occupied by the *Khati*, the other buildings, and the sacred grove is surrounded by a stone wall. Women, who are regarded as unclean, have no right to enter the walled precincts of the *Khati*. During the religious festivals and celebrations, which present an occasion for plenty of eating and still more drinking, the women are served outside the *Khati* walls, where they have a good time in their own way.

These sanctuaries (*Khatis*)³ have special attendants who are the 793 guardians of the material belongings of the sanctuaries as well as the faithful conservers of all traditions and the executors of the different ceremonies which constitute their religion. The number of these attendants is considerable and each of them has a special name and special duties to perform.

Although having the same names, the prerogatives of the attendants of the *Khati* in the different communities are not the same. The attendant, for example, called *dasturi* has more obligations in one community than in another; the same is true of the other servants of the *Khati*: the *dekanosi*, *khutsi*, and *khevis-beri*. The name has not the same equivalent of rank. Consequently the accounts of various authors concerning the different categories of the attendants of the *Khati* and their functions are not in accord-

4 [see p. 25 ff. - Analyst]

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than eighty persons. Rods are stretched from the ceiling to support³⁴⁶ the horns of wild goats and jaw-bones of sheep which have been⁷⁷⁸ offered as sacrifices; these relics are so numerous that they almost fill the churches, especially those in Free Svanetia. In the corners are piles of various objects, such as arrows, helmets, pieces of broken glass, and what not. Especially interesting are the wooden cages with birds carved out of wood and hanging from the ceiling. All objects preserved in the churches are regarded as sacred. The walls inside the churches are covered with images of the saints and sometimes pictures of the kings with crowns on their heads. Characteristic of every Svan church is the large wooden cross fixed in the farther part of the church on a square elevation. Such crosses are covered with thin silver plates representing small icons (holy images). Similar crosses are also found in the churches of Dadian Svanetia, in Ilori, and in Ratcha.³⁰ All these churches possess, according to Bakradze, a large number of holy images, crosses and sacred books, especially those in Upper Svanetia, comprising the communities of Mujal, Mesti, Kali, and Ushkul.

The horns of animals sacrificed as thank-offerings, are pre-^[712] served in the churches, such large were piles of these horns in a church in the village of Chubiani "that it was necessary to count them by thousands."³⁷

The Svan churches, with all their archeological treasures as⁷⁹³ well as their worthless objects, such as broken glass, earthenware, jaw-bones of sacrificed animals, etc., were jealously guarded by the native priests (*bap* in Free Svanetia and *pap* in Dadian Svanetia). The word *pap*, or *bap*, is borrowed from the Megrelian language, in which a priest is called *papa*. The *paps* have their assistants, called *mtavar* and *dikvna*.

The office of the *pap* is not hereditary, because anyone may attain it by fulfilling all the necessary preparations, but in the meantime the son of a *pap* has special privileges in following his father in the office without being required to make any special preparation. The *paps* came from the lower class of society — the

³⁰ Bakradze: a, 36

³⁷ Radde: a, 112-14.

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Caucasus, which are removed—all except the dagger—when entering a church. 793

Although the *paps*¹ are ignorant and mostly illiterate, yet they render great service to their country and their people. They have preserved many objects of great archeological and scientific value and have hindered the spreading of Mahommedan teaching in the country by upholding the Christian faith, although in a distorted and mutilated form. [795]

The *paps* conduct services in the churches, perform wedding and funeral ceremonies, baptize children, kill the sacrificial animals, and see to the punctual observance by the people of the established holidays.

The Svans have numerous holidays created by religious and climatic conditions. Thanks to the high elevation of the country in the Alpine regions of the Caucasus, the cold winter lasts for half a year, and only during the remaining six months is work carried on in the open. But in spite of such a short time, the Svans work only four days a week, and the other three—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday—are passed in rest, counting as holidays. On these days no one is allowed to work; he is permitted only to hunt. The people believe that in case of disobedience of this rule, not only the guilty person but his whole community will be severely punished by a pestilence, a bad harvest, hail or other mischief. Therefore, in order to avoid the danger in the summer months of July and August, when the fields are full of ripening grain, every man in the village is obliged to take a public oath by which he solemnly promises to abstain from any kind of work on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Anyone who is found guilty of disobeying this rule is obliged to pay a fine amounting to from one to three rubles. The money is used to cover communal expenses, such as religious festivals, sacrifices, and other items. Besides these three holidays, the Svans are forbidden during the months of May and June to make cheese or to eat any food prepared from milk on Fridays. 796 792

In addition to observing holidays in order to insure a good harvest, the people bring sacrifices to God almost every Sunday during the months of July and August. These public sacrifices are 2 [10, Swan priests; see cat. 116, pp 35-37 -- Analyst]

796 known among the Svans as *litbkhli*, the procedure of which is as
792 follows: the people of one or two villages unite and buy an ox
● or a cow and a few sheep, which are killed in the churchyard.
After the church service the boiled meat is put in large troughs
with short legs, called *ladrula tabag*. Some of the men put the
troughs of meat on their shoulders while others are praying to-
gether, asking God to send them a good harvest. The prayer is
as follows in the Svan language:

"*Didab, dideba Gmertsal didab u apkheda, madl u apkheda; khosha Gerbet,
si laneshd nai, ka atkabun nishgvel dabars skarkhal i khola haer; ka ankabun
nai i nishgvei kumash knola masig, eshu knvai didab apkheda.*"

In English translation the prayer reads:

"Praise, praise God! The praise be given, the thanks be given (to Thee).
Omnipotent God, be merciful to us; preserve our fields from hail and bad
air; shield us and our herds from the evil disease. Many praises be given
to Thee!"

At least one member from every home in the village or villages
taking part in the ceremony is obliged to be present at the celebra-
tion of the sacrifice.

After the prayer, everyone sits down and the feasting begins.
Everything is eaten up and the remaining bones are carefully col-
lected and burned on the spot.

Besides the three weekly holidays, the Svans have many others
during the year which diminish still further the number of work-
ing days.

796 The Pshavs observe their principal holidays in the sanctuaries
of *Lashris-jvari* and *Thamar-mepe*. Among the Khevsurs the prin-
cipal annual holiday is celebrated in the month of July and is
called *atengena*. Other holidays observed in the sanctuaries are:
Khakhmatis-jvari, which lasts for two or three days, and *Gudanis-
jvari*. In the other sanctuaries a number of holidays is observed
annually. Special holidays and religious festivals took place at
certain appointed times in the year. The *dekanosis* take care of the
exactness of their execution. These holidays are of paramount
interest and importance to the people. As we stated at the begin-

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ning of this chapter, religion with the Georgian Highlanders held 796
a sustaining and regulating place in the life of the community. The
various and numerous religious rules were observed and executed
without any hesitation.

In the celebration of holidays in the leading sanctuaries, not 796
only the natives but their neighbors (even the Mohammedans) 563
take part. Thus, at the festival of the *Lashris-jvari*, at the end of
July, known as *lashroba*, or *Lashris-jvaroba*, there are present, be-
sides the Pshavs, Tushes, Khevsurs, Mahommedan Kists,
Georgians from Kartli and Kakleti, and others. This fact was
observed by the French investigator, Baron de Baye,⁴¹ during the
religious celebrations in the monastery of Alaverdi in Kakhetia.
The religious festivals in the cathedral of Alaverdi are described
in detail by A. L. Zisserman.⁴²

The Khevsurs come to these festivals wearing their best clothes 796
and arms, and bring animals for sacrifice. Visitors who have 782
given a special vow to the *Khati* are bare-footed and wear over [292]
their garments long white shirts which they take off at the en-
trance to the enclosure of the sanctuary and throw into a pit
especially dug for this purpose. A great number of animals is
sacrificed to the *Khati*—hundreds of sheep, goats and oxen are
killed. Baron de Baye relates that 750 sheep and two oxen were
sacrificed at the celebration in the monastery of Alaverdi in
Kakhatia, and that the celebration in the Khevsur sanctuary,
Khakhmatis-jvari, required the sacrifice of from 500 to 600 sheep
and twenty to forty oxen. The blood of the animals is caught in
a special wooden vessel. The *dekanosi* who butchers the animals
washes his hands in the blood and makes the sign of the cross
on the forehead of the offerer. The pelt and fore part of the
animal belong to the *dekanosi* and the hind part to the offerer,
who forwards it to the attendants of the *Khati* to use as supply for
the general feast which follows the religious ceremonies.

Besides saying prayers and killing the sacrificial animals during [693]
religious holidays, the *dekanosis* also hear complaints of various [793]
kinds and settle disputes, according to established custom.

⁴¹ Baye: a, 253.

⁴² Zisserman: 23-4.

¹ [i.e., shrine attendants; see cat. 116, p. 21 f. f., esp. p. 29--
Analyst]

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away the evil spirits, who, as they believe, are torturing the woman.⁸⁴⁴ This custom is preserved at present in the inaccessible mountain⁷⁸⁹ regions of the Caucasus, and was in ancient times practiced in the whole of Georgia, with the difference that instead of a gun the man used his bow and arrow.

This belief in the existence of the evil spirits attacking the⁷⁷⁶ woman in childbed and the new-born baby prevails among all⁷⁸² groups of the Georgian Highlanders. Thus the Khevsurs believe⁸⁴⁶ that the evil spirits who attack the mother and the babe are small black creatures, countless in number and called *dobilebi*.¹¹ The people believe that the *dobilebi* live among the old deserted homes (ruins) in the village or its vicinity. Such places are known to the Khevsurs as the *banurani*. The evil spirits (*dobilebi*) annoy and disturb the human beings, although they cannot kill them. The *dobilebi* especially seek women and babies, especially children when they are ill. This is regarded by the Khevsurs as the cause of the attack of the *dobilebi*, which they express in the following words: "*Dobilthashi gekhviv*." In order to drive the evil spirits from the ill child it is necessary, as they believe, for the whole family to observe the custom called *ashlis dashla*. It consists of taking forty-five cakes, or, as they say in Georgian, *samjer khuthmeti*, meaning "three times fifteen" (from the Georgian words, *sami*, meaning three, and *khuthmeti*, meaning fifteen). Besides these forty-five pieces of bread, a special large cake is baked with cheese or meat filling and smeared on top with butter. This large cake is called *satsinao*. All these cakes are brought to the place of residence of the evil spirits and thrown to the village children, who, having been informed beforehand, are waiting by the ruins (*banurani*). The child who succeeds in catching the large cake (the *satsinao*) is regarded as the luckiest. Instead of bringing cakes, the Khevsurs sometimes kill a goat in the *banurani*. In this case the head of the animal belongs to the man who killed it and the rest to the owner.

This custom of bringing the cake or killing the animal in the *banurani*—the place regarded as the residence of the evil spirits—

¹¹ Bardavididze-Lomia: 254-5.

- 776 is nothing else than bringing a sacrifice to them in order to appease
 >772 their anger and make them favorably disposed to allow the ill
 846 child to live.

Besides the babies and their mothers, according to the opinion
 776 of the Khevsurs, the evil spirits (*dobilebi*) also attack the women
 844 in general, and consequently every misfortune occurring to a
 woman is ascribed to the *dobilebi*. The Pshavs believe that a
 woman with child is pursued by the evil spirit called *matsuli*, who
 tries to change her baby.

Belief in the existence of evil spirits who attack babies and
 women prevails not only among the Khevsurs and other Georgian
 Highlanders, but also among all groups of the Georgian nation.
 Such beliefs are likewise encountered among other peoples of the
 Caucasian peninsula, and far away beyond the Caucasus among
 the peoples of Asia Minor.

Thus, the Georgians of the province of Kakhethi¹² believe in
 the existence of the evil creature called *Ali*, which is represented
 as a beautiful girl with golden locks. She enters the room of the
 woman in childbed and is able to kill with one stroke both mother
 and child.

The Georgians of Karthli and the mountain region called
 Mthiulni also know the creature *Ali*, which resembles in appear-
 ance and character the one described above.

The Georgians believe, according to Dr. J. Reineggs,¹³ that the
 evil spirits—the *Luftgeister*, as he calls them in German—attack
 with great glee the mother and the new-born baby.

The Georgians of Meskhethi¹⁴ have an evil spirit called the
avi-soli, which enters the house where the woman is lying in child-
 bed and endangers her and her child's well-being. The name *avi-*
suli means "evil soul," formed from the Georgian words, *avi* (evil)
 and *suli* (soul).

Besides these examples, showing the belief of some of the
 Georgian groups in the existence of evil spirits attacking the
 mother and baby, similar beliefs are held by all other groups of

¹² Chursin: a, 50; also c, 26.

¹³ Reineggs: 112-113.

¹⁴ Khakhanov: b, 10-11.

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The same cleansing power of fire is used by the Khevsur woman⁷⁹³ at the time of her purification when she leaves the menstrual hut⁸⁹⁹ (*samrevlo*) and returns home with her baby.

Many other peoples of the Caucasus share the Georgians' belief¹⁷¹ in the supernatural power of fire.⁴² Thus, for example, the Abkhazians,⁴³ in order to protect women in childbed from the evil spirit, called *abn-ikou*, ask the help of the god of the house-hearth, called *ajakhar*, promising him a thank-offering for his help.

The people also believe in the protective power of a rope in the⁷⁸⁷ shape of a snake. For example, in the district of Sakatali, a rope⁸⁹⁹ resembling a snake is laid around the woman in childbed and the people continually fire their guns, because they believe that evil spirits are afraid of snakes and gun-shots.

In some parts of Georgia red thread is also used as a defense against the evil spirits attacking women in childbed. In such cases, the hip of the woman in travail is bound with red thread as a means of providing sympathetic magic which will protect her from evil spirits⁴⁴ who, as the people think, cause the suffering.

It should be interesting to mention briefly the belief of the⁷⁹² Georgians, not only in the magical power of red thread, but in the⁷⁵³ red color generally. Almost every contagious disease is understood by the people to be sent not merely by evil spirits but as personifications of the spirits themselves.⁴⁵ Therefore, to cure the sick it is necessary, in their opinion, to please the spirits. The spirits are called *batonebi*, meaning "lords," the plural form of the Georgian word, *batoni*, meaning a lord. In order to appease and beseech the *batonebi*⁴⁶ to depart from sick persons, they try to please them with songs, music, prayers, decorating the room with gay colors, putting on a new dress, keeping everything clean, avoiding any disturbances, etc.

The principal color in decorating and dressing is red. This⁷⁵⁵ color predominates, and red thread is used as a protective

⁴² Chursin: f.

⁴³ Derjavin: 14-15.

⁴⁴ Jashvili: 63.

⁴⁵ Stepanov: 88-9.

⁴⁶ Mamaladze: 45-6.

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793 hereditary rights. The priest, called khevis
beri "elder of the valley," khutsi "priest" or
dek'anozi "dean," pronounced the ceremonial
prayers and sacrificed the sheep and cows

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[782] offered as victims. The kadagi or dzhvaris
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[791] meene "interpreter," "tongue of the dzhvari,"
a kind of shaman, pronounced the will of the
khat'i. The medroshe "standard bearer" or
khat'is pekhi "foot of the khat'i" carried the
sacred banner (drosha) on festive days. A
special functionary attended to the brewing of
the sacred beer, a custom borrowed from the
Ossetes. The beer was drunk at the annual
festivals which were attended by all the "serfs"
of the khat'i.

In Svanetia the functions of the Khevsur
khevis beri were performed by priests not
regularly ordained and without any theological
training; they were called bap (from Greek
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[771] pappas). The numerous ancient churches
were neglected and were only used for storing
the vessels, vestments and books relating to
the divine service; these were jealously
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796 guarded from alienation. Many originally
Christian feasts and Saint's days were cele-
brated with prayers, drinking of home-made
brandy and eating of sacrificed animals and
fancy bread of different traditional shapes.
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[769] Similar rites were observed on the commem-
oration days of the dead which were performed
at fixed intervals.